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ABSTRACT

Between March 1983 and January 1984, the Hispanic Research Center conducted exploratory field research in a South Bronx (New York City) neighborhood in order to develop hypotheses and collect data which could be used in research relevant to the avoidance of delinquency by male Puerto Ricans considered at risk. The research highlighted the conceptual importance of such factors as peer interaction and legitimate and illegitimate opportunities. It also emphasized the limitations of existing conceptualizations of delinquency-related factors, particularly the notions of "delinquent orientation" and "strategic life styles." It aided, too, conceptualization of how factors described in the literature of different conceptual traditions may interact to produce delinquency or to avert it. Finally, the research made clear the need to carefully develop measures of delinquency and peer and family interaction, as well as other factors. Careful measurement of these variables may permit research to better capture aspects of adolescents' and parents' lives relevant to delinquency and its avoidance among Puerto Rican youth in the South Bronx. (CMG)

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EXPLORATORY STUDY ON DELINQUENCY AND DELINQUENCY AVOIDANCE IN THE SOUTH BRONX

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EXPLORATORY STUDY ON DELINQUENCY AND DELINQUENCY AVOIDANCE IN THE SOUTH BRONX

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Between March 1983 and January 1984, the Hispanic Research Center conducted exploratory field research in a South Bronx neighborhood in order to develop hypotheses and collect data which could be used in research relevant to the avoidance of delinquency by male Puerto Rican adolescents considered at risk of becoming involved in this type of dysfunctional behavior. We held three discussion groups with boys and young men from the area in order to elicit their ideas about and knowledge of delinquency.(1) Two of the groups involved youth from 13 to 15; the third, youth from 16 to 20 years of age. The first two discussion groups were held at Fordham University. Discussions were led by Dr. Edward Eismann, director of the Unitas Therapeutic Community of the South Bronx, an outreach program for neighborhood children, and members of the Hispanic Research Center (HRC) staff. A total of 45 persons participated, of whom 15 were subsequently interviewed individually in depth. The participants in the first two groups, with a few exceptions, did not have extensive experience with serious delinquency, but were in daily contact with peers who engaged in serious crime and were generally well informed about the situation in their neighborhood. The third discussion group was held in an after-hours club (unlicensed bar) in the neighborhood. Members of this group were more heterogeneous in terms of age and delinquent experience. Because the street door to the club was left open, the discussion attracted many youth in the area whom we had not previously contacted. In a setting familiar to them, the youth who attended were remarkably frank in speaking about their experiences.

We also spent many afternoons in participant observation and informal conversation with neighborhood youth who had not participated in the group discussions.(2) The settings for these observations and informal interviews included street corners, sandwich shops, playgrounds, and the youths' homes. Sitting on park benches between games of basketball, leaning against parked cars, and huddling under store awnings in the rain, we discussed a wide variety of themes such as school experience, work history, peer and family relations and involvement with serious and non-serious delinquency. We also had the opportunity to observe and ask questions about some of the common illegal activities in the neighborhood, such as drug dealing and the stripping of stolen and abandoned cars.

Formal interviews, structured around written outlines, were used to gather detailed information and to follow up topics which were raised in the course of informal conversations and participant observation.(3) These interviews were tape-recorded both to facilitate the collection of data and to capture the terminology used by subjects. It was hoped that these intensive formal interviews could have been carried out with a larger number of subjects. We found, however, that unless a field worker establishes a full-time presence in an area, it is difficult to develop rapport with a large pool of subjects. The lack of full-time presence in the neighborhood also was a problem when we sought to organize additional discussion groups by delegating responsibilities to local people with whom we had worked. Some of these contacts did not follow through on their commitments to recruit group participants.

The discussion groups and the individual interviews produced different dynamics between researchers and subjects, and yielded different kinds of information. The group discussions were useful in raising themes for subsequent interviews, in establishing new contacts in the neighborhood, and in generating a sense of friendship and bonding between researchers and participants which could still be activated months later when field workers encountered participants on the streets. Surrounded by their peers, group members tended at times to engage in competitive posturing and were less likely to admit to what they perceived as negative feelings of fear or inadequacy than they were in individual interviews. In the group setting, however, many anecdotes emerged about the participants' activities which might not have been related had the individual been alone with the interviewer. In addition, the presence of others who were acquainted with the individual's history provided a check on the tendency of some to exaggerate their exploits.

The group setting with its lack of privacy, frequent interrruptions and shifts in the focus of discussion did not produce the kind of in-depth biographical information which was often obtained in individual interviews. While individual interviews and conversations generally provided richer information, the group experience proved invaluable to creating trust and in generating mentions of events that were later explored in more detail with individuals.

The observations discussed below address two research concerns: the need to tailor existing conceptualizations of delinquency-related factors to the actual life circumstances of inner-city Hispanic adolescents, and the need to develop measures of these concepts which adequately reflect social life in these neighborhoods. Our comments relate to the following conceptualizations from the delinquency literature (see article by Anderson and Rodriguez in this issue): the nature of peer interaction; the nature of illegal activity in the inner city; the structure of opportunity; the nature of family interactions; and the types of interpersonal strategies adopted by some adolescents to avoid delinquency.

Peer Group Dynamics

Our observations of adolescent peer groups in the South Bronx suggest that earlier conceptions about such groups may be too simplistic. The literature on delinquency (4) often emphasizes simple measures of an individual's orientation to delinquent peers, but these do not — in our experience — always differentiate delinquents from non-delinquents, since "orientation" may include complex and contradictory sets of attitudes and behaviors. There is, we have found, considerable complexity in peer interactions both at the level of the individual's relations with others, and at the level of group dynamics. This unexpectedly complex picture derived from participant observation points to the need for orienting future

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research around questions which go beyond the existing definitions of peer relations in the literature.

Within small groups of South Bronx adolescents who consider themselves "friends" there are apparently major differences in the delinquency (or lack of it) of individuals. Boys with little or no involvement in crime may consider their "best friend" to be, for example, someone who is a heroin dealer. It is less certain whether this perceived bond is reciprocal, i.e., whether the delinquent is likely to consider the "good" boy a friend. Nevertheless, it appears that in the South Bronx "delinquent orientation," if considered as spending time with serious delinquents or wishing to do so, does not necessarily lead to delinquent behavior.

In advancing tentative hypotheses about why this might be the case, it is important to keep in mind two frequently overlooked factors. First, the delinquent is not always functioning in his role as delinquent and may have other social or psychological needs which are fulfilled to some degree through friendships with non-delinquent individuals. Second, in neighborhoods characterized by pervasive violence and extremely high crime rates, it is to the advantage of non-delinquents to maintain friendships with delinquent peers who might otherwise victimize them and who can provide protection against threats from outsiders.

Any discussion of peer groups requires outlining the different types of associations into which an individual may enter. We have found that typical South Bronx adolescent males belong to several kinds of groups to which they have varying degrees of loyalty. Close friends constitute the inner circle of most boys and they probably spend the most time together. It is important to note that, at this level, we find evidence of considerable variation in delinquency among peers. Just beyond close friends are those individuals who either live or "hang out" on the same block and who, because of proximity and familiarity, feel a certain degree of loyalty toward each other. More distant than the block or "hang-out" group are those individuals who are known in the neighborhood and who may interact with each other to a lesser degree. Simply being a familiar face, i.e., a member of the neighborhood group, is thought under most circumstances to provide a certain degree of protection against victimization by delinquents in the area. This is even more the case with the block group, which may also provide assistance in retaliating against aggression and which therefore serves as a deterrent to potential attackers. Particular individuals rarely are in a fixed relation to most of those in the block and neighborhood groups and are likely to drift over time from one set of peers to another, or to have several sets of associates at the same time, distinguished from each other by the setting or activity (e.g., school vs. block, sports, community center, drug-sharing, etc.).

In relation to gangs, the one organization of that type currently operating in the area has largely ceased engaging in delinquency and has turned instead to legitimate activities, such as holding dance contests and producing commercial musical recordings. These alternative interests provide gang members with concrete goals, a group identity and a sense of competence, and are often economically remunerative as well. Apparently, when legitimate means of achieving these and other ends of gang membership are available, at least some individuals are not averse to pursuing their aims through lawful means. This diversity of gang activity has rarely been commented on in the literature (5) nor has the possibility that gangs may evolve away from serious delinquency previously received much consideration.

Another finding which we believe deserves attention is that serious delinquents may, rather than seeking to involve non-delinquent peers in illegal activity, attempt to shield their "good" friends by urging them not to get into trouble or telling them to stay home when a crime is being committed. There are several factors which contribute to this tendency of serious delinquents to protect their non-delinquent peers. Non-delinquents may not have the expertise required for particular crimes and may not, therefore, be valued as partners. To the extent that delinquents entertain conventional notions about what constitutes success in the larger society, they may encourage "good" friends to pursue mainstream goals which appear more attainable by those without criminal experience or police records. Encouraging others not to become involved in crime is frequently accompanied by self-deprecating remarks which reflect the low self-esteem and fatalism of serious or career delinquents. This fatalism as regards self, however, does not usually extend to the delinquent's view of non-delinquent peers, whose life chances are, if anything, often seen as exceedingly favorable. The phenomenon of the delinquent steering the non-delinquent away from crime can thus in part be interpreted as identification with or a gesture of altruistic friendship toward those with whom the delinquent, for reasons we have outlined above, has established affective bonds.

In addition to those cases which emerged in our fieldwork of delinquents shielding non-delinquent peers from involvement in crime, we encountered instances of both delinquent and non-delinquent youths urging younger boys to "take advantage" of their juvenile status by committing criminal acts for which the penalties are less severe than they would be if committed by an adult. This understanding that one can "get away" with crime while a juvenile is quite widespread in the area, as is the corollary realization that once one is legally an adult one must either leave delinquency behind or take fewer risks. It may be difficult to disentangle the element of status-seeking or acting out in these crimes from more instrumental motives, but it is still important to examine the extent to which this type of delinquent socialization is encouraged or imposed on individuals by their older peers.

One of the salient, subjectively recognized social categories among South Bronx Puerto Rican youth is the "tail," a younger boy who persists in following a group of older peers. The descriptions offered by informants of the relationship between "tails" and older peers suggest that "tails" may either be kept at a distance and discouraged from engaging in delinquent acts or, in other cases, actually exhorted and occasionally coerced to prove themselves as criminals. It is important to note that when Black American informants were questioned they were unaware of the "tail" concept and indicated that they did not employ any comparable term. This would tend to substantiate the contention that Puerto Rican youth may participate in or develop resistance to delinquency through different paths than other youth. It also suggests once again that peer group dynamics and the socialization process of delinquents are varied and complex.

To address this variety and complexity methodologically, research in this area should include questions which measure not only the time spent by respondents with peers who engage in delinquent acts, but also the actual activities which are shared, the attitudes which are conveyed and the prestige and leadership hierarchies which are perceived in the peer network. In addition, questions should be directed at examining the respondents' experience with being either encouraged or discouraged from participating in crime by both delinquent and non-delinquent peers, as well as their history of involvement in gang-like groups or more informal associations. Ideally, the researchers' observations should be used to corroborate or falsify at least some of the self-reported information.

Illegal Activity and Opportunity in the Inner City

Inner-city areas characterized by high crime rates, low levels of community organization and many illegitimate opportunities may create patterns of interpersonal interaction which may, in themselves, be conducive, under certain circumstances, to involvement in serious delinquency. In our exploratory study in the South Bronx, we found that the interrelated problems of violence, fear of violence, and the carrying of weapons are more pronounced than in most other settings and, consequently, play a particular role in causing delinquency. This sug-

gests that normative ideas about the illegality of carrying a weapon are different in the South Bronx than in more affluent areas. It also indicates that deterrent effects, e.g., fear of arrest for violent acts or the carrying of weapons, will be complicated in high crime areas by the need of otherwise law-abiding individuals to protect themselves. It is probable that only a very small number of South Bronx residents carry weapons with the intention of employing them offensively or as an implied threat for use in the commission of a crime. Most of those who carry knives, firearms, or other weapons do so for protection or to deter potential aggressors.

While protection and deterrence cannot be entirely separated, it is important to distinguish between them. Protection is thought by many South Bronx residents to be conferred by simply having an appropriate weapon within reach in case it is needed. Openly displaying or carrying a visible weapon may be a more effective deterrent. However, particularly among young people, it also risks being seen as a challenge in the frequently hostile and competitive maneuvering for position which is a feature of everyday interpersonal relations on the street. Thus, for example, wearing a spiked wrist band or a visible sheath knife may lead other youths to test the armed individual's willingness to employ the weapon or his skill as a fighter.

This phenomenon of displays being perceived as challenges extends also to areas other than weapons, and intensifies the need many people feel to carry arms. Simply wearing jewelry or clothes which are in style or carrying a radio or other highly prized item may expose one to predatory individuals or lead to the kind of testing in which having a weapon or, alternatively, a "back-up" group of supporters nearby, is all that stands in the way of losing one's possessions. Consumption and use of status items, which is pervasive throughout American society, may be especially important in low-income neighborhoods where people sometimes experience considerable pressure to exhibit the signs of success. This entails certain additional consequences and requires that particular adaptations be made to the high crime environment, such as those mentioned above.

One unintended result of this low-level neighborhood arms race is that those who carry weapons are at increased risk of being arrested for arms possession, of being dismissed from jobs for the same reason, or of being involved in a violent altercation. This kind of violence, or arrests for arms possession, clearly contributes to increasing delinquency. In the case of youths who lose their jobs when employers find they carry weapons, the vicious cycle of fear-arms-violence is one more element in an often dismal work experience where a lack of skills, low expectations, and petty humiliations become a self-fulfilling prophecy that discourages them from participating in the job market and makes them less employable for those few jobs which are available.

Our observations of youth who engage in illegal activities because other options are, or are perceived to be, limited tend to support the emphasis in much of the literature on the structure of illegitimate opportunities as a causal factor in delinquency.(6) It has less often been noted, however, that this structure of opportunity also influences semantics in the realm of work and illegal activity and thus neccessarily influences research methodology, since in order to ask questions which are meaningful to the subjects it is necessary to comprehend their conceptual categories.

Survey research in high crime inner-city areas requires special sensitivity to the subjects' notions of what is and what is not illegal or criminal activity. In our field work we found that employment and illegal activity are not necessarily seen as mutually exclusive and that individuals adapt to difficult economic circumstances with various mixes of legitimate and illegitimate activities. When asked about their work history, many youths reported that one of their first jobs was stripping pipes and wire from abandoned buildings to sell as scrap. This practice, although clearly illegal, was not perceived as such and would not therefore be mentioned in response to questions about, for example, "taking something that belonged to someone else." Other "jobs" of this kind, illegal but not perceived as such, include working in a "chop shop" where stolen autos are disassembled or painted, helping drivers of trucks that transport or sell stolen goods, or directly selling goods which others have stolen. Several other occupations, such as working in illegal betting operations, are known to be against the law but are considered innocuous.

This narrower subjective definition of crime or illegal activity is probably a reflection of the limited legitimate opportunities available to inner-city youth. It is important that it be taken into account in framing survey questions, since many if not most individuals have done something illegal or held a job which is technically illegal. Moreover, the subjects interviewed may be unable to recognize that this activity is "crime" or, concretely, for example, "theft of something worth fifty dollars or more."

Family Structure, Socialization, and "Lifestyles"

Family socialization and interaction are among the variables often posited as predictive of delinquency. As was true in the case of peer relations, we believe that in the area of family structure it is important to develop a more complex picture of kin group functioning than that which has usually been presented in the delinquency literature. It has long been recognized by anthropologists and comparative sociologists that alternative types of family structures may fulfill similar kinds of functions, e.g., discipline, socialization, reproduction, etc.(7) There is some tendency in the literature to view a two-parent nuclear family household as a modal type and to give little attention to the variety of family arrangements which exist in non-two-parent households. In our fieldwork, we heard many mentions by informants of relatives outside the nuclear family who provide certain kinds of discipline and support. In particular, it may be important to examine the role of the mother's brother in substituting in various ways for an absent father. Households in which there are one or more siblings and a mother (but not a father) are likely to be classified as "female headed," whether or not there is a male present or nearby who fulfills some of the duties of a father. Within the large number of female-headed households to which youths in the South Bronx may belong, it is necessary to make some additional distinctions about the nature of the residence unit and the character of family life. There may, for example, be some significant differences in delinquency among youth who have had close relationships with a mother's brother and those who have not.

In line with our interest in determining how at-risk youth avoid serious delinquency, one of the first findings which emerged from our field research was the difficulty in establishing any empirically verifiable connection between the delinquent involvement of individuals and particular "strategic life styles." As described by Mancini (8), a strategic style is a person's typical way of coping with the demands of others. These typical ways of coping emerge from the meaning a person attaches to the positive and negative messages he/she receives from significant others, primarily parents, other adults, and peers. These strategic life styles are based on the person's capacity to balance two psychological dimensions: *power* the ability to get others to do one's bidding, and *affiliation*, the ability to form close ties with others. For example, attraction toward others combined with autonomy in power relations produces a strategic style which Mancini labels the "together guy"; attempts to dominate in power relations combined with hostility toward others produce a style labelled the "trouble maker," and so on. Even though we observed youth in different neighborhood contexts, we were unable to form definite conclusions about whether a particular subject fell into one of these strategic styles. We found that youths frequently expressed values or described behavior on one occasion which were inconsistent with what they had told us on another occasion. While in-depth observations over a greater period

of time may have permitted us to more definitely categorize individuals' strategic styles, the application of these constructs may require clinical expertise beyond the usual training of social science observers. Thus, typologies of interactional styles such as Mancini's may be of limited use in this kind of field work.

We did find support for the association between a "social isolate" or "loner" life style and non-delinquency. Youths who choose to remain off the streets after school, or whose parents enforce such isolation, are likely to avoid involvement in any type of delinquency, if only because their situation gives them few opportunities to experiment. The fact that these individuals avoid all delinquency, however, is of limited relevance in understanding the differences between youths who are non-serious and serious delinquents.

Conclusion

In summary, our exploratory research has helped us to more appropriately apply existing conceptualizations of delinquency to the situation of Puerto Rican youth in an inner-city area. The research has highlighted the conceptual importance of some factors, such as peer interaction and legitimate and illegitimate opportunities; it has emphasized the limitations of existing conceptualizations of delinquency-related factors, particularly the notions of "delinquent orientation" and "strategic life styles"; and it has aided our conceptualization of how factors described in the literature of different conceptual traditions may interact to produce delinquency or to avert it. Finally, the exploratory research has alerted us to the need to carefully develop measures of delinquency, peer and family interaction, as well as other factors. Careful measurement of these variables may permit research to better capture aspects of adolescents' and parents' lives relevant to delinquency and its avoidance among Puerto Rican youth in the South Bronx.

NOTES

1. There are few precedents for using this type of methodology in delinquency studies. For a discussion of group process and its use in a therapeutic setting, see Farber, A. and Rogler, L.H., *Unitas: Hispanic and Black Children in a Healing Community*, Monograph No. 6, New York: Hispanic Research Center, Fordham University, 1981; and Eismann, E., *Unitas: Building Healing Communities for Children*, Monograph No. 8, New York: Hispanic Research Center, Fordham University, 1982.

2. On participant observation, see Pelto, P. and Pelto, G., *Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry*, 2nd ed., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978, especially Chapter 5. Classic urban studies using this approach include Whyte, W., *Street Corner Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967; and Stack, C., *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*, New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

3. See Schatzman, L. and Strauss, A., *Field Research: Strategies for a Natural Sociology*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1973, pp. 72-77, on formal interviewing.

4. Elliott, D., Huizinga, D. and Ageton, S. *Explaining Delinquency and Drug Use*. National Youth Survey Project, Report No. 21. Boulder, Colorado: Behavioral Research Institute, 1982.

5. Moore, J. *Homeboys*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978, is an exception.

6. Ianni, F.
Black Mafia. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974.

   Cloward, R. and Ohlin, L.
Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs. New York: The Free Press, 1960.

   See Anderson, E., *A Place in the Corner*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976, for a cogent analysis of this question.

7. See Stack, C., Note 2.

8. Mancini, J.
Strategic Styles: Coping in the Inner City. New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1981.

HISPANIC RESEARCH CENTER: RESEARCH BULLETIN

The HRC is directed by Dr. Lloyd H. Rogler, Albert Schweitzer Professor in Humanities at Fordham University.

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